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THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

What of its future

by

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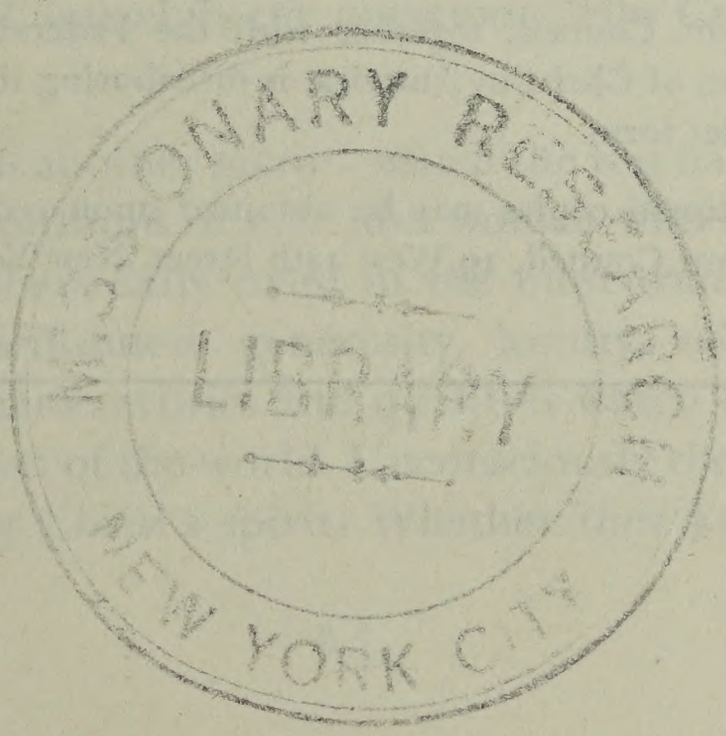

This address was delivered on January 31, 1945, at a dinner given by the Protestant Council of the City of New York to launch a wider program of service to church and community by the Council and its six constituent organizations.

The Council was formed to promote the coordination of different religious and welfare activities in New York, looking toward better cooperation among the churches and agencies of the Protestant faith and a more effective affirmation of the great principles of that faith.

It earnestly desires a continually closer relationship with the Catholic and Jewish faiths in the belief that the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man spread across all sectarian divisions.

Seldom has there appeared in our time a more moving statement of mankind's belief in God than that found in Mr. Rockefeller's address. With the conviction that he expresses the thoughts of millions in this country, and outside it as well, who share his vision and long for its realization, The Protestant Council, together with the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, is distributing the address in pamphlet form.

Additional copies may be obtained upon request to The Protestant Council, 19 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.

The Christian Church

What of its future?

NOT many weeks or months had elapsed after this World War began before there was presented to our vision a picture so horrible it hardly seemed that it could be true.

It appeared that hell had broken loose and that millions of evil spirits had become incarnate in human form and were going about the earth committing atrocities and acts of cruelty beyond belief.

In the face of this awful picture it is not strange that we should ask ourselves the question: "Has Christianity failed?"

But there is another picture which the war has painted. In it we see millions of men and women who are exemplifying in their daily lives, in the most commonplace fashion, unselfishness, generosity, loyalty, self-sacrifice and other characteristics and qualities which command the admiration of the world. Unconsciously these people are reflecting Christ's spirit. Whether they know it or

not, their inspiration comes from the God of all good deeds. Yet many of them have no church affiliations, for too often the church seems to them quite apart from their lives, an institution which has little contact with or understanding of their problems, since theirs is fundamentally a religion of deeds, not of creeds; expressed in life, not in words.

We turn from this picture with a glow in our hearts and say with renewed faith: "Christianity has not failed; churches may have failed, but not Christianity! For never in the history of the world was Christianity a more vital force in human life than it is today."

The Church Reborn

In the presence of this great host of noble men and women, who, generally, have not come from the church, although directly or indirectly all have been more or less influenced by it; who, many of them, have faced death, have lived a life far worse than death, have sacrificed their all, we ask, "What of the future of the Christian Church?"

Will these people, after the experience through which they have passed, find in the church generally as it exists today the recognition, the association, the guidance and the inspiration which they need and have a right to expect? Regretfully we must answer, "No." For the church

has learned too little to speak their language, to think in terms of their environment, to meet their needs.

If this be true, one of two things is inevitable. Either this unorganized spiritual force which is silently dominating millions of lives will not be conserved, or the church must have a new birth if it is to meet this marvelous opportunity and great human need.

Let us picture, for a moment, this reborn church.

It would be the Church of the Living God.

Its terms of admission would be love for God, as He is revealed in Christ and His living spirit, and the vital translation of that love into a Christlike life.

Its atmosphere would be one of warmth, freedom and joy, so sympathetically and distinctly manifest as to attract and win into its fellowship all those who are striving to live useful and worthy lives.

It would pronounce ordinance, ritual, creed, all nonessential for admission into the Kingdom of God or His church. A life, not a creed, would be the test.

Its object would be to promote applied religion, not theoretical religion.

As its first concern it would encourage Christian living seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year.

It would be the church of all the people, of everyone who is fighting sin and trying to establish righteousness; the church of the rich and the poor, the wise and the ignorant, the high and the low—a true democracy.

Its ministers would be trained not only in the seminaries, but in some form of work-a-day life, so that they might acquire a personal knowledge of practical problems. Thus they would live in closer touch with humanity, would better understand and sympathize with human difficulties, and would exert their influence as much in living as in preaching.

A United Christian Leadership

Would that I had the power to bring to your minds the vision as it unfolds before me!

I see all denominational emphasis set aside.

I see cooperation, not competition.

In the large cities I see great religious centers, wisely located, adequately equipped, strongly supported, ably led, inspiring their members to participation in all community matters.

In smaller places, instead of half a dozen dying churches, competing with each other, I see one or two

strong churches, uniting the Christian life of the town; great economy in plant, in money, in service, in leadership; the money thus saved available for home and foreign mission.

I see the church, through its members, moulding the thought of the world and leading in all great movements.

I see it literally establishing the Kingdom of God on earth.

Shall some such vision as this be realized? Upon the answer to that depends in large measure the future of the Christian Church.

We have been considering the demand for a united Christian Church from the point of view of the world's need for Christian leadership. There is another motive, not less compelling, urging the churches on toward that end. It is the necessity for cooperation if the forces of righteousness are to triumph in the eternal warfare against the forces of evil. The forces of evil, united on the common ground of their nefarious interests, are ever ready for aggressive action; while the forces of righteousness, although seeking a common goal, are frequently so preoccupied with their individual interests and petty differences that their attack upon the common foe is too often belated, and not infrequently scattered and ineffective.

Christian men and women must come to see that only by the fullest cooperation and the setting aside of emphasis on nonessentials can the many branches of the Christian Church, standing together on the common ground of Christianity, hope for victory in this great warfare against sin.

The Spirit Giveth Life

When Christ came into the world, He found the church loaded down with ritual and formalism. Every minutest detail of daily life was regulated by religious enactment. In the eyes of the church the most religious man was not he who gave to the poor, who helped the unfortunate, who was unselfish, meek and lowly, but he who kept most punctiliously every jot and tittle of the law. The *spirit* of religion had been displaced by empty form.

To establish spiritual righteousness in the world, to build up an internal rather than an external religion, to emphasize the responsibility of the individual to his Maker, was Christ's mission on earth.

Few and simple were the forms He set up or sanctioned, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, but they were wonderfully beautiful and filled with sacred inspiration.

Baptism is an ordinance of profound symbolic mean-

ing. Christ Himself was baptized. He did not, however, make baptism a condition of church membership.

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, also rich in symbolic beauty. In this day of materialism, far be it from any true follower of Christ to minimize the spiritual value of these symbols; rather should they be preserved and guarded.

On the other hand, in the face of the great problems of sin, of evil and of spiritual hunger which confront the world today, can we imagine that, were Christ to come to earth again, He would regard the observance or non-observance of these and other ordinances and individual beliefs, or the manner in which they are observed, as of sufficient importance to justify controversy among His followers, and their separation into rival factions?

Can we fancy Him giving His approval to such a course, resulting as it does too often in relaxing the warfare against the common enemy, sin, and in causing men to forget their common responsibility, the needy brother?

The Soul and Its God

Let ordinance, creed, ritual, form, Biblical interpretation, theology, all be used to enrich worship, and to bring the believer into a fuller understanding of Him Whom we worship, as each individual or separate church

may find them helpful toward that end. But God forbid that they should ever, any of them, divert the attention from, or be regarded as a substitute for, that personal, spiritual relation between the soul and its God which is the essence of true religion.

God forbid that they should be allowed to cause divisions among the followers of Christ or be set up as barriers at the door of any branch of the Church of the Living God.

What the world craves today is a more spiritual and less formal religion. To the man or woman facing death, great conflict, the big problems of human life, the forms of religion are of minor concern, while the spirit of religion is a desperately needed source of inspiration, comfort and strength.

I plead not for a modification of form, but for its subordination to the spirit; not for the abolishing of ordinance and sacrament, but for their voluntary rather than obligatory observance.

As we face, then, the world's need of great spiritual leadership, that humanity may be brought into vital, daily relationships with a living God, and that all the forces of a righteousness may be united in an eternal warfare against the forces of evil, we ask again the question: "What of the future of the Christian Church?" This is the answer which I give you:

If the various divisions of the church as it is organized today catch the vision, have the breadth, the tolerance, the courage, and, setting aside all nonessentials, all barriers, will stand upon the bedrock principles of God's love and Christ's living spirit, "not satisfied," as Donald Hankey has said, "until the church is the church of all good men and women, until all good thoughts and deeds are laid at the feet of the Lord of all good life," the Church of the Living God will come into being, ushering in a new era of Christian unity.

What an opportunity! What a privilege! What a duty! In God's name I ask, does anyone dare let it pass?

What Men Seek in the Church

What I have said thus far is the substance of an address which I made during the first World War. The convictions then expressed have only grown upon me with the passing years. I voice them tonight with even greater assurance as to their timeliness and present applicability. The bitter lessons taught by World War No. 1 have not saved us from the vastly greater conflagration of today. Nor has the church during the past quarter-century put its house in order and with unity of action opposed the advancing hordes of the godless.

Today, as always, humanity craves the substance of religion; while churches too often emphasize the form.

Men have long looked to the Christian church for religious training and spiritual inspiration that they may acquire both the knowledge and the will to make wise decisions and to take right actions in their daily lives. Their natural craving for religious guidance must not be repelled by alphabetical lists of denominational churches and agencies, when what they seek is so fundamental, and sectarian differences are so superficial. Rather should they be able to get in any Christian church, whatever the style of its architecture or the shade of its belief, the spiritual wisdom and strength which they need to fit them for practical daily living.

To say that no progress has been made toward the resolving of denominational barriers during this quarter century would be unjust to various groups which have made earnest efforts along those lines and definite advance. But to say that any broadly conceived, concerted movement to that end is under way, which is generally participated in, would be equally untrue.

Toward religious cooperation more progress has been made, although it has been too slow and too little. The movement in the interest of which we are gathered here tonight gives promise of significant possibilities in cooperation. Six interdenominational groups representing Protestant interests in Greater New York have come together in the Protestant Council of the City of New

York to confer together, to plan together, to finance their needs together, and let us hope increasingly work together. The relationship is as yet only partially developed. There are many questions to be worked out. How successful and effective the organization may become, time only will tell. But granting its weaknesses and imperfections, like the Dumbarton Oaks conference in the political field, it is a start in the right direction. It is an important experiment in religious and welfare cooperation on a significant scale.

On Feb. 3, 1943, the cargo transport Dorchester was torpedoed at 1:15 A. M. and sank within twenty-five minutes in iceberg waters, ninety miles from Greenland. As the ship went down, four chaplains—one a Catholic, one a Jew, two Protestants—were on the deck encouraging the men and passing out life belts. When there were no life belts left, they took off their own and gave them away. These chaplains were last seen standing arm in arm praying.

As they went to their death, united in the service of their common Lord, so let us, the living members of the great religious faiths they represent, go forward, shoulder to shoulder, as a united army, fighting evil, establishing righteousness, brothers in service, sons of the one God and Father of us all!